

Book Review: Marc Michael Epstein (ed.), *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink. Jewish Illuminated Manuscripts*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press 2015, pp. 288.

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The present book had been in the making for over two decades¹ and even a quick glance at the preface and the table of contents shows the sheer amount of work put into its preparation. It constitutes the mutual endeavour of researchers representing various disciplines ranging from the history of art to Jewish folklore as well as museum curators and modern day illuminators. No less important is the contribution of the libraries and individual collectors from all over the world who have shared their resources. As a result, the dissertation covers almost a millennium-long period of time and takes into consideration a wide variety of specimens: from the Hebrew Bible, halakhic codices and mystical treatises, through fables, prayer books and wedding documents up till Hebraised versions of the medieval romances.

The book is divided into thirteen chapters which revolve around several broader subjects. Obviously, the lion's share of space is devoted to the iconographic hermeneutics. Thus, the lengthy chapter six (*Iconography: Telling the Story*) teaches how to "read" the pictures of the Jewish manuscripts and treat them as an additional interpretative layer characterised by recurring patterns, figures and scenes.² By analysing this iconographic code, the authors clearly go against the traditionally held assumption that visual artwork

¹ Marc Michael Epstein (ed.), *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink. Jewish Illuminated Manuscripts*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press 2015, p. vii.

² The graphical elements in the manuscripts were often put in the places traditionally reserved for commentaries with the centre devoted to the main body of text. As a result this allowed for advancing some particular interpretations without challenging the central text. See: *ibidem*, p. 135.

was regarded as the “icing on the cake”³ in a culture which has been constructed as primarily textual. In this regard, chapter nine (*Other Worlds: Fantastic Horizons and Unseen Universes*) dealing with the broadly understood Kabbalah is particularly interesting. It turns out that Kabbalistic concepts such as divine face, sephirotic tree or descent of Shekhina made especially attractive subjects to depict.

In addition to this, the dissertation examines the social functions played by the illuminations and asks to what extent they have reflected the reality and where the wishes of the community were aimed. The conclusion is that while the pictures were supposed to convey the desired, ideal image, they featured minute details that veraciously bear witness to a variety of Jewish customs practised in a given country. This general problem of the relation between the imagination and reality is explored in the chapters which tackle particular visual subjects. Thus, chapter four (*Mapping the Territory: 'Arb'ah Kanfot Ha'arez – The Four Corners of the Medieval Jewish World*) acknowledges the various understandings of the geography of the world while chapter ten (*Zion and Jerusalem: “The Sum of All Beauty, the Joy of All the Earth”*) shows the evolution of the image of the Holy City. These sections also refer to the central role of the biblical and midrashic narratives in interpreting the contemporaneity. The blurring of the borders between the current era and mythohistory could be then interpreted as serving the purpose of coping with harsh circumstances such as the Jewish expulsions of the Middle Ages: to envision these calamities as somehow predicted by the Bible was equal to assuming that they belong to the divine plan concerning the chosen nation.

A significant part of the book is devoted to the problem of Jewish identity and intercultural exchange. The authors question the obviousness of the very idea of “Jewishness” and go against the somewhat archaic assumption that all the people behind the production of the Jewish manuscripts were themselves Jewish. Thus, already mentioned chapter four (*Mapping the Territory: 'Arb'ah Kanfot Ha'arez – The Four Corners of the Medieval Jewish World*) proves that the creation of these manuscripts did in fact involve some representatives of other nations, cultures and religions. In fact, the Jews were part and parcel of the contemporary world and as such were influenced by their Christian and Muslim neighbours. This topic is further analysed in chapter five (*No Graven Image: Permitted Depictions, Forbidden Depictions, and Creative Solutions*) which shows how the Arabian aesthetics characterised by flamboyant

³ Ibidem, p. 182.



calligraphy and the avoidance of the portrayal of faces affected Jewish art and its symbolism. Furthermore, chapter seven (*Dialogue and Disputation: Cultural Negotiation*) breaks the myth of the medieval Jewish ghetto by emphasising cultural exchange, while chapter eleven (*In the Royal Court: Jewish Illumination in an Age of Printing*) shows the illuminated books as an attempt to imitate the surrounding cultures in producing the Jewish equivalents of valuable objects.

Finally, much space is devoted to the technical details of the manual production of the illuminations. Thus, chapter three (*Parchments and Palimpsests: Scribe, Illuminator, Patron, Audience*) convincingly presents the manuscript as a totally unique piece of art with many people of various professions involved in the creative process itself. The chapter also serves as an approachable introduction to codicology and shows how much information about the manuscript makers can be inferred from their works. Somewhat paradoxically however, these are the illuminators who remain the greatest riddle. Very little is known about them and there are numerous divergent hypotheses concerning their origins. Also, an extremely valuable part of the book is dedicated to the scrupulous recreation of the process of illuminating a book. In chapter *Focus: The Illuminated Page: Materials, Methods, and Techniques* the reader can learn about the nitty-gritty details while chapter twelve (*Illuminating the Present: Contemporary Jewish Illumination*) proves that this form of art is still lively nowadays with craftsmen mixing modern and the medieval techniques.

The dissertation is targeted at a broad audience including specialist and non-specialists alike. The book is clearly written and happily reduces the usage of technical jargon to a minimum while at the same time providing explanations of all the necessary terms in the first chapter (*Introduction: for the Love of the Books*). Yet, although the language of the publication is light-hearted, the book is rich in information, interesting hypotheses and surprising interpretations, often challenging previously held convictions. The monograph ends with a convenient index and an elaborate bibliography documenting the sources, catalogues and treatises that in itself may serve as a very helpful tool for anyone wishing to study the subject further. A separate matter is the outstanding quality of the present luxury edition which features hard-cover, glossy print-paper, elegant typeset and a commodious page layout. To sum up then, this book speaks about beautiful books – and in doing so is certainly a delightful example of such.



Note about the author

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